THE

CHURCH OF CHRIST:

WHAT IT IS AND WHO ARE IN IT.

A SERMON PREACHED IN THE FIRST REFORMED EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF NEW YORK, MADISON AVENUE AND 55TH ST., NOV. 16, 1879, BY THE PASTOR, REV. W. T. SABINE.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE VESTRY.

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WM. KNOWLES, PRINTER, 104 EAST 13TH STREET.
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At a meeting of the Vestry of the First Reformed Episcopal Church, New York, held Wednesday, November 26th, 1879, the following preamble and resolution was unanimously adopted :

"*Whereas,* In the opinion of this Vestry, the sermon preached on the morning of Lord's Day, Nov. 16th instant, by our beloved friend and Pastor, Rev. William T. Sabine, is eminently calculated to promote those distinctive principles of Gospel and Evangelical Truth in defense of which the Reformed Episcopal Church was founded ; therefore

Resolved, that our pastor be requested to furnish a copy of the sermon designated, for publication, and that five thousand copies of the same be printed in pamphlet form for distribution."

Copied from minutes of Special Vestry Meeting, Nov. 26th, 1879.

FRED. A. PELL,
Clerk.

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"And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."—Acts ii. 47.

Christendom in the past has been divided into two great sections. Each of these sections is animated by a different principle, and represents a great distinctive idea.

These divisions may be comprehensively designated as Romanist and Protestant; for, though there be vast bodies of professing Christians who would not admit themselves embraced in either of these terms, and who have indeed taken no active part in the great contest between those to whom they are primarily applied, yet, in view of the opinions which they maintain, they may justly be classified under one or the other of the two great systems of which these terms are fairly representative.

The central and pre-eminent truth of Protestantism is justification by faith in a Divine Saviour. The

evangelical believer holds this to be the article *of a standing or falling church.*

The central and grand idea of Romanism is salvation in the communion of a Visible Church.

The question at issue between them is this: "What is the Church?"

That there is a Church of Christ; that union with that Church is an indispensable condition of salvation to the soul of him who hears the Gospel—thus far they are agreed. But advance a step and ask: "Where is and who constitute this Church, and how shall I know that I am in this Church?" The responses you receive will instantly reveal the fact that there is a mighty gulf between these opposing views. The one scheme says, "If you believe on the Lord Jesus, if you accept Him as your sufficient Saviour, if you dedicate your heart, your life, your love to Him, this is evidence of your union with that one true Church, outside of which is no salvation."

The other scheme replies, "There is a divinely instituted and visible Church. In this Church there are rites, ceremonies, sacraments, and a sacrifice. For the right administration of these there is an appointed priesthood (mark you, not *ministry*), in which certain graces, virtues and powers reside; and which graces, virtues, and powers are transmitted from age to age, in regular and tactual succession. Outside of this succession, which traces its pedigree in a direct line of

ordination back to the apostles, there is no valid ministry. "Services performed, sacraments administered by this priesthood, are saving and efficacious. On the other hand, if the officiator be not in this line of tactually transmitted office, then are they vain and inefficacious, an idle mockery."

Believe all of this; unite yourself with this Church, accept her as the Warder of your conscience, surrender your right of private judgment, receive as authoritative, final and infallible, her decisions respecting faith and duty and her interpretations of the Word of God; in short, submit unquestioning to her supreme arbitrament, and commit your soul to her keeping: thus shall you become a member of the one only Catholic and Apostolic Church, and thus, and thus only, hope to be saved.

Examine these statements: the one affirming, "Believe on, love, live for the Lord Jesus, and by whatsoever name you may be called, and whatsoever form of worship you may conscientiously select, you are enrolled among the members of the one true Church;" the other declaring, "You must wheel into this line, you must adopt this polity, you must receive the sacraments at the hands of this priesthood, or you are not numbered in the one only Church."

Does not a glance convince us that there is an eternal distinction between these two schemes; a chasm, yawning, and which no theological bridge-builder will

ever be able to span? They are not the same, and while they both remain unchanged, there can be no coalition between the two. The watchword on one side is CHRIST: the watchword on the other is THE CHURCH. The one system makes a living union between the soul and the Saviour everything: the other system makes connection with a particular ecclesiastical Organization the great overshadowing issue. Now the question immediately before us—a question of solemn and pre-eminent concern to all who would be saved—a question destined it may be to become, at no distant day, perhaps, a subject of vast political importance in the Republic of which we are citizens, is: Which of these views is correct? Both cannot be so. In making this decision, we must be calm, candid, deliberate, dispassionate, unprejudiced. We must not allow ourselves to be silenced by assumption, to be blinded by a so-called reverence for antiquity, or to be dazzled by any ecclesiastical Organization, however powerful in consolidation, strong in numbers, gorgeous in ceremonial, or venerable in age it may appear.

We must plant ourselves upon this truth; a truth on all hands and by all parties recognized, namely, that God is the author of the one true Church; that whatever it is, and wherever it is, it was divinely instituted and is divinely sustained; and then ask, Which of these views is God's view? Which of them is most accordant with His revealed word and will?

Scripture is the judge to which we carry this appeal. We are quite aware that the advocates of sacerdotalism would fain have both Tradition and Antiquity to sit as Associate Justices in the trial of this cause. Neither of them has any vested right of decision here. Scripture alone is for us the accredited and undisputed voice of God.

The written Word of God claims for itself an entire sufficiency for the settlement of such questions.

When some sought counsel and guidance elsewhere, the inspired prophet indignantly exclaimed, "Should not a people seek unto their God? To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isaiah viii. 19, 20.)

The Bereans were commended for bringing even apostolic teaching to the test of Scripture. (Acts xvii. 11.)

The Apostle instructed Timothy (II. Tim. iii. 16, 17), "All Scripture is given by inspiration, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

If Paul does not teach here the sufficiency of Holy Scripture in and of itself to settle all such questions, what does he teach? He informs Timothy that the Word is expressly given that the man of God "may be perfect and thoroughly furnished." If the Scrip-

ture be thus all that he needs, why should he fall back upon tradition and antiquity ?

Furthermore, when the Apostle would establish a fact in the experience of Abraham, he appeals to neither of these empty, though much boasted, authorities ; he simply asks, "What saith the Scripture ?"

Beyond this we are told (Hodge, Outlines of Theology, p. 80), "The whole ground upon which Romanists base the authority of their tradition is invalid. History utterly fails them. For more than three hundred years after the apostles they have very little, and that contradictory, evidence for any one of their traditions."

To the Sacred Oracles, then, we carry the appeal.

What is the Church ? Upon this question the statement we are studying throws a flood of light.*

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* "Nothing is more common than to hear Acts ii. 47 explained as signifying merely the being brought within reach of the means of grace or admitted into a visible church ; a privilege which of course may be enjoyed equally by the unrenewed and by the renewed in heart ; so that all the members of a church, however destitute of sanctifying grace, may equally be said to be in a state of salvation.

"It is certain, however, that in the passage alluded to the expression means much more than this ; for on inspecting the context, we find that the 'saved' who were added to the church were true penitents and believers. The exhortation of St. Peter was, 'Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.' 'They that gladly received his word,'—that is, did repent and accept the offer of salvation,—'were baptized ;' and of such as these, not of the unrenewed in heart, were the daily accessions made to the church.

"Admission, then, to a visible church presupposed, in the apostles'

Examining it, we are led to remark:

I. *That the Church which we are seeking is composed of such as are in a state of salvation, and are added by the Lord.* These are two of the essential characteristics by which it must be recognized. Its members are being saved; τοὺς σωζομένους is the Greek, and they are incorporated into it by a Divine power. The hypocrite, or the thoroughly worldly-minded professor, the formal Christian, having but a name to live, albeit high in office, and in honor in some ecclesiastical Organization, can have, it would seem, no place here, for they are not among the "saved," and certainly were not *added by the Lord.*

Conversely, it must be admitted, as a fair and obvious inference, that those who are "saved," whoever they may be, have been so added, and are enrolled among the members of this church.

Wherever there is a soul now in a state of salvation, on which the Lord Jesus has set His own shining mark, and written His new name, there is one assuredly belonging to the Church of Christ.

II. *We observe that there is not now existing, that*

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times, the existence of a new heart, which is precisely what is affirmed concerning the import of the word regeneration."—"The Church of Christ," p. 209, Rev. Ed. Arthur Litton, Oriel College, Oxford.

Admission in our day should presuppose the same, but pastor and church officers cannot read the hearts of their fellow-men. The words of King Solomon in his Temple prayer, I. Kings viii. 39, are ever true, "Thou, even Thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men."

there never has existed on the earth, any ecclesiastical Organization which could vindicate an exclusive title to the possession of these essential characteristics.

There has never been a body of professing Christians anywhere, or of whatever name, who could say without great arrogance and assumption, "We embrace within the limits of our membership, absolutely and without exception, all who are now being saved." Nay, we find it difficult to believe that there has ever been a body so uncharitable, so foolish and wicked, as to attempt the substantiation of such a claim. Even the most assuming have found a safety-valve for their exclusiveness in the theory of "uncovenanted mercies," or the plea of invincible ignorance, and felt themselves constrained to admit that not a few of those who do not travel with them along the road which they count orthodox will find admission through some back door: a way dismal, a way dishonored, a way dark and dangerous, no doubt, they think; but still a way of access.

Ask the most strenuous advocate of Tactual Succession, of the Papal hierarchy, of Baptism by immersion, of Episcopal ordination, of Congregational freedom, whether souls may be saved in any other than the church to which he belongs. He will hesitate, and end by telling you that they will be better saved; that they are more likely to be saved, *there*, than elsewhere. Press him hard, probe him deep; try to get from him a distinct, explicit and unqualified assertion

that there is no possible access to heaven for any soul which is not Romanist, Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian or Methodist—that is, which does not belong to the church of his conviction,—and you will either receive no reply or a negative response. The fact is that, however thoroughly persuaded of the rectitude of our own position, and however firmly attached to the principles we hold, a spirit of true charity towards our brethren, a sense of our own liability to err, an enlightened reason, and a tender conscience, will make us instinctively recoil from damning those who differ, simply because they differ; when many among them, however blinded they may seem to us, we know are sincerely purposed to do right.

This leads us to note:

III. *That no visible religious organization whatsoever is commensurate or coextensive with that spiritual body which constitutes "the Church of Christ."* This assertion is based upon their own admissions. If the most exclusive and narrow are obliged to confess that all the σωζομενοι—all who are being saved,—are not numbered in the Fold to which they belong, are not sailing in the vessel in which they have embarked, while it is a distinctive mark of the Church of Christ that it embraces all the saved; does it require better than half an eye to see that these two things are not equals?

How keen a vision do we need to discover that while the Church of Christ embraces all the souls in their particular church who are saved, it embraces many, many souls besides; and that while (so long as there is reason to believe that there are true-hearted and devoted servants of the Saviour among them) they have the happy right to call the church to which they belong a part, the best part, a portion, the most comely portion, a branch, the most beautiful and fruitful branch, so believing it, of the Church of Christ, they have no right to arrogate to themselves an exclusive title, and to say, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are WE?"

We hold it, then, for manifest that it is no true definition of the Church of Christ in its verity and totality to say that it is here or there; that it is this body of Christians or that.

The question recurs, What is it? Is it undefinable; indescribable? Has it no limits? Who are its members?

We fall back upon our essential characteristics. Whatever description we may give of it, thus much is certain: it is composed of *those who being in a state of salvation are added by the Lord.* And who are in a state of salvation? Let Paul and Silas speak, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts xvi. 31). Let John reply, "He that hath the Son hath life" (I. John v. 12).

Hear Paul again, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom. x. 9). Hear also the declaration, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." To these add the sufficiently clear and altogether decisive words of the Lord Himself (John v. 24), "Verily, verily I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

How otherwise, then, shall we describe THE CHURCH OF CHRIST than as our Liturgy defines it, "the blessed company of all faithful people," or as our XXIst Article sets it forth, "The souls dispersed in all the world who adhere to Christ by faith, who are partakers of the Holy Ghost, and worship the Father in spirit and in truth, are the body of Christ, the house of God, the flock of the Good Shepherd—the holy universal Christian Church."*

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* The Reformed Episcopal Church is equally emphatic in her XXIVth Article as to what constitutes *the ministry* of the Church of Christ, and utterly repudiates the false and pernicious dogma of Apostolic Succession, in the following words: "That doctrine of 'Apostolic Succession,' by which it is taught that the ministry of the Christian Church must be derived through a series of uninterrupted ordinations, whether by tactual succession or otherwise, and that without

This is that great company of the Redeemed, part in glory, part on earth; part militant, part triumphant; part bearing the cross, part wearing the crown; of every age and every land; whosoever they may be, or wheresoever found; who believe on the Lord Jesus with the heart, and profess faith in the Lord Jesus with the lip and by the life. No narrower definition satisfies the dictates of reason, the law of love, the declarations of Divine Truth.

But let it not be thought for a moment that in view of this truth we are at liberty to disparage or make light of ecclesiastical Organizations. Ecclesiastical Organizations have served, and will continue to serve most important purposes in the Economy of Grace. They are essential to the proper development, combination and efficiency of Christian effort. The world could not do without the churches; as little can believers afford to dispense with them. They make associated Christian effort possible and powerful, and minister needed strength, encouragement, and support in fellowship. They are nurseries, gymnasiums, preparatory schools of the soul's forever-life. Nor can we too deeply de-

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the same there can be no valid ministry, no Christian Church, and no due ministration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, is wholly rejected as unscriptural, and productive of great mischief.

"This Church values its historic ministry, but recognizes and honors as equally valid the ministry of other churches, even as God the Holy Ghost has accompanied their work with demonstration and power."

plore the tendency, in some quarters manifest, to make light of the importance of church membership.

While it is fundamentally important to belong to *the* Church of Christ, it is also in a very high degree important to belong to *a* church of Christ.

The open and acknowledged association of believers is the only adequate means, humanly speaking, of preserving and extending the influence of Christianity, which without organization could effect little in the world.

The very institution of the Lord's Supper, simple as it was, involved combination, association, arrangement; and all who recognize its divine authority must admit the inevitable inference.

While therefore we do most uncompromisingly assert that every soul, accepting Christ as its Divine and all-sufficient Saviour, is a member of His own living and true Church, we do also insist with earnestness that every believer owes it to his own soul, to the cause he has espoused and the Master he serves, not to separate himself from the brethren, but to unite with some branch of the Visible Church. Let us not forget to emphasize this point; in these days we have need to guard against a tendency, fraught with dangers, to disparage connection with the Visible Church.

It is yet further apparent that since a living faith, and a correspondent life of holiness, are indispensable qualifications of membership in THE CHURCH

OF CHRIST, no man necessarily joins *the* Church by joining *a* church. One may say: "I have been admitted to the privileges of full communion in the Episcopal, the Methodist, the Presbyterian, the Roman Catholic Church." Nay, he may say what is better than that: "I believe, I love, I am seeking to serve Jesus Christ." We cannot, therefore, say to him, "Since you have united with such or such a body, you certainly belong to *the Church of Christ:*" for the history of the past and the experience of the present both sadly witness that there are tares in all these wheat-fields; that there are some, alas, many, in all these churches who are not among the "saved."

It is indeed our privilege, hearing a profession of faith in, and love to Jesus Christ, to think and hope the best; to assume its sincerity, and to rejoice in that thought and hope till otherwise compelled. But to know beyond a doubt that our fellow is in truth a member of the Church of "the saved," is not for any man; is alone for Him who searcheth hearts. This is a secret between man and his God; "for who knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of a man which is in him." Jesus said, "I know my sheep and am known of mine." This Church, then, of which we speak, to-day is to man invisible; yet real, existent, perpetual, a living body; each member of which is in union with the Living Head. Scattered to-day through every land, on every coast, over every sea; called by

varied names; living under distinct organizations, some in hovels, some in palaces; differing in habits, language, nationality, social relations; widely separated; to each other little known; but all trusting the Lord Jesus; all living for the Lord Jesus, all known to God, all written in Heaven, all one in Christ! There comes a day, when this mighty host, no longer separated, scattered, wandering: gathered home from every shore, shall stand before the throne; "clad in raiment pure and white, victor palms in every hand;" visible, united, triumphant; a glorious Church, "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing:" the Bride, the Lamb's wife.

Two things remain still to be said:

I. Beloved people, let us cut ourselves adrift from the notion that this church or that church is THE CHURCH. The church of my preference, the church of my experience, the church of my affections,—yes! these it may be; but I may not, I must not, call it the Church of Christ, *the Church of the* σωζομενοι. Let us thank God for this truth revealed; for sad, sad would be the tidings, though the gentlest of Heaven's angels whispered them never so softly in our ears, "All souls ungarnered in the church of your choice shall be damned." God forbid that all the vineyard should be blasted save that little corner which it is my privilege, with others like-minded, to till!

II. Rest not, beloved, in your membership, the

orthodoxy, the antiquity, the dignity, the numbers, the influence of the Organization to which you belong: rest only in a personal union with CHRIST. There is our safety, there our hope; for if we be not one with Jesus, though the authorities of every church in Christendom did swear us orthodox, we should be lost.

Ah! we may be called Christian, and yet be against Jesus. We may assume the solemn vows of baptism, and unite in the memorial of the dying Lord, and yet be partakers with the world. We may kneel this evening in the house of prayer, and sit to-morrow evening in the house of Belial. To-day it is the Church; to-morrow it may be the world, and worldly things beloved; the haunts, the enjoyments, the spirit, the fellowship of the irreligious and ungodly, who at heart hate Him to whom we owe our spiritual life and all! What avails it that we cry, Lord! Lord! if our hearts have no deep, living, and constraining love for Him we so address?

Not always can it be thus. There comes a day of revelation, of discernment, of infallible discrimination: a day which "shall try every man's work, of what sort it is."

You are a church member. Ah! friend, this is little. Are you in truth a Christian? Your pastor's hand has inscribed your name upon the Parish Register. Ah! friend, this is little. Has the Lord added it to His list of the "Saved."